

# AHA EAP & Horsemanship Training Program Guide



Community Mental Health Services & Supports  
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# Angel House Australia Equine Assisted Psychotherapy Program

## THE WOMAN BEHIND THE AHA EAP PROGRAM

Mel Mardon is the presenter of this program and has 27 years of experience working with horses, children, youths, and adults. She has successfully practised this program in South Africa, Namibia, and Australia with evidence-based outcomes. Mel is a life coach, PTSD counsellor, cognitive behavioural therapist, counsellor, and NDIS specialist behaviour support practitioner. She has various diplomas, certifications, and registrations in the mental health sector. Mel is the co-coordinator of the Mental Health Professionals Network Blacktown, the MHPN Gordon/Chatswood network coordinator, and an active member of various other MHPN networks in New South Wales. After the murders of her two eldest sons, Mel brought her youngest son to Australia to give him a new start in life. Horses were an integral part of their healing process following these lived traumas and life in general in South Africa. Her son was diagnosed with Complex PTSD and Dyslexia at the age of 14, and Mel applied her approaches of healing through horses to assist him in finding strategies and managing his challenges resulting from these disorders.

## WHY CHOOSE EQUINE-ASSISTED THERAPY?

Throughout history, humans have formed bonds with horses. Riding them can be exciting, but there's something more profound about the relationship. This is why mental health professionals often recommend equine therapy, as it offers several benefits. Horses and people share several similarities, and equine therapy challenges individuals to see themselves and the world differently. It has been observed that those who struggle to progress or achieve their treatment goals can experience significant breakthroughs with the help of equine therapy. Research has also confirmed that equine therapy has several benefits, including lowering blood pressure and heart rate and reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress. Equine therapy has also proved beneficial for individuals struggling with addiction or mental illness. Horses teach several life skills that can be learned better from them than from a person. This is why equine therapy is considered a primary treatment option for individuals who face mental illness, addiction, or behavioural issues.

## UNDERSTANDING THE ENERGY FIELD BETWEEN HORSES AND HUMANS CAN HELP YOU BETTER CONNECT WITH YOUR HORSE.

As living beings, we all possess an energy field called the aura that surrounds and interpenetrates our physical bodies. Every human, animal, plant, and even inanimate objects have this luminous body that emits its own characteristic radiation.

In a herd of wild horses, this aura is what they rely on as a "sixth sense" to communicate with each other. When something seems suspicious to one horse, the entire herd reacts accordingly. Each individual horse doesn't need to "know" what is happening; they trust the collective wisdom of the herd. This energetic tracking system innately built into our equine companions is also what helps them decipher what kind of a mood you are in and what you are feeling. Horses feel into us. If our energy field seems good, they can trust the greater good of our relationship with them.

## ***Morphic resonance***

The phenomenon known as morphic resonance and swarm theory describes beings that are part of a shared energy field with their own identity, where individuals are autonomous within the field. The field that includes you and your horse has a life of its own, and as a unified field, it has a unique relationship with other beings and things. This may explain why certain behaviours persist, such as repeatedly spooking at the same flagpole, as a neural pathway is created within the combined energy field of the human and horse.

Neural pathways are created after doing anything a few times, and they become ingrained in the psyche of both humans and horses, reinforcing certain behaviour patterns. The energetic field is essential to horses, making them vulnerable to energy. Therefore, it is up to us to be the Emotional Leader. Being a leader does not mean being a tough alpha mare; it means remaining neutral and making sound decisions for both beings. We can also set our intentions for harmony, which will inform our feelings and actions and penetrate the field of energy around us, inevitably affecting our horse's response.

However, this is not a simple task. Horses are prey animals, and the energy field around them is more fine-tuned than that around predators like us. If our field of energy is not exuding safety, our horse's reactions may get bigger and bigger, potentially creating an endless bad biofeedback loop. This is why a natural horsemanship industry is built around this concept, as frustration can arise when our horses do not respond as expected. Therefore, we must be aware of our energy and set our intentions for harmony to maintain a healthy and positive relationship with our horses.

## ***Weakened energy field***

Negative thought patterns can weaken a horse's energy field. This means that the development of a disease in the body could have been happening in the energy field for some time before it became physically apparent. In addition, a weakened energy field can make horses more prone to fight-or-flight behaviour, which is unsafe for either the horse or the rider. We commonly inherit these challenges when we start working with new horses, and some of the behaviours we observe may not have even originated with us.

## ***Becoming the Emotional Leader***

I want to talk about the potential problems that can arise in the energy field when working with horses. Fortunately, all these issues can be resolved with some effort. You don't have to be an expert in energy work or have any special abilities. All you need is a willingness to connect with your horse as a partner and become the Emotional Leader in your relationship.

Being an Emotional Leader doesn't require perfect emotions all the time. You can still be committed to leading even if you're having a tough day emotionally. When your horse triggers negative emotions in you, try responding with humour, empathy, or curiosity. This way, you can be fully present with your horse and deepen your relationship.

Playing with the energy field around yourself and your horse can help you get to know your horse on a deeper level. This can improve your horse's trust in you and lead to better health and happiness for both of you.

## **Cardiac Coherence between horses and humans**

*Cardiac Coherence is the source of our inner power. It refers to the physical and emotional harmony in our body. When we are in coherence, our nervous system and other systems work together harmoniously.*

*Studies have found that the heart has around 40,000 neurons that function autonomously, similar to a small brain. These neurons send signals directly to our brain. Despite its size, the electromagnetic field generated by this neuron system ranges from 90 centimetres to 2 meters, while the electromagnetic field generated by the brain itself oscillates between 3 centimetres and 2.5 meters.*

*The signals sent from the heart to the brain regulate our emotions. The heart has neurons with long-term and short-term memory. The signals these neurons send to the brain affect our emotional experiences. The electromagnetic field that the heart emits can also change depending on our emotions.*

*The heart sends much more information to the brain than the brain to the heart. In fact, 80% of the communication goes from the heart to the brain, and only 20% goes the other way around. The heart generates 60 times more energy than the brain, and the amplitude of its waves is 5,000 times bigger.*

*By being aware of this information, we can see the relevance and importance of our emotions in our own life experiences. "The heart is right."*

*Feeling or remembering negative emotions unbalances our nervous system. When we feel negative emotions, the heart sends signals to the brain, which in turn sends signals to the hormonal system. Some chemicals, such as cortisol, are released into the blood and can harm our health if produced in excess. In this situation, our Heart Rate Variability is disordered and incoherent.*

*An incoherent Heart Rate Variability blocks cognitive functions such as attention, memory, perception, and problem-solving. In a state of incoherence, we are more likely to suffer from stress, anxiety, apathy, depression, etc.*

*On the other hand, positive emotions generate physiological and psychological benefits. Evoking positive emotions, such as love, joy, gratitude, compassion, etc., stimulates the immune system. Our health increases, and we feel lighter. On the psychological level, positive emotions allow the brain to be more creative and to find efficient solutions to real problems. When we feel positive emotions, the heart rate variability generates coherent waves that balance all the body's systems. The ability to think clearly, learn, remember, reason, and make the right decisions is significantly increased. Then, we find ourselves in Cardiac Coherence.*

*In summary, talking about Cardiac Coherence is talking about efficiency. When we are in coherence, the nervous, cardiovascular, hormonal, and immune systems work together harmoniously and efficiently.*

### **What are the benefits of being in Cardiac Coherence?**

Cardiac Coherence is a state in which our heart and brain rhythms are in sync, allowing us to overcome difficult situations and return to normal. This state also enhances our intuition, reduces stress and anxiety, strengthens our immune system, improves our sleep quality, and increases our energy levels. It also helps us to concentrate better, learn more effectively, and solve problems more efficiently. Developing heart intelligence can lead to deeper connections with ourselves and others, improving our relationships, increasing our self-confidence, and encouraging us to rely more on others. Horses can contribute to our Cardiac Coherence as they have a heart electromagnetic field that is five times more powerful than ours, extending up to nine metres.

When horses are in a state of freedom, they are also in a state of coherence. This generates a large and powerful electromagnetic field that can profoundly affect us. When we are surrounded by a group of horses in coherence, their electromagnetic field can influence ours, regulating our own field and bringing us into harmony with ourselves. This can lead to a deep emotional release that can help us better understand ourselves and increase our self-confidence and courage.

Living this experience can help us make positive changes in our habits and routines, leading to a more enduring state of coherence.

## **Equine Therapy Benefit #1: Identifying and Coping with Feelings**

Many individuals who struggle with behavioural issues, trauma, and other mental health problems often do not know how to cope with their emotions. As a result, they may display negative behaviours to numb their sadness, anger, fear, or even joy. For therapy to be successful, learning how to identify, experience, and cope with emotions is important. Equine therapy is a powerful way to connect with your thoughts and feelings. During equine therapy, you do not rely on your mind to address problems, as this often leads to denial, blaming others, or intellectualizing around the problem. Instead, you must rely on your body and heart to feel and react in the moment. Horses have a unique ability to sense emotions and react accordingly. If you are angry or aggressive, the horse may become obstinate. If you are anxious, the horse may become skittish. However, when approached by someone open and calm, the horse is more likely to respond positively. Witnessing the horse's response promotes self-awareness and can help individuals see themselves more realistically.

## **Equine Therapy Benefit #2: Communication & Interpersonal Skills**

Many individuals who suffer from mental health issues may find it challenging to form close relationships with others due to their emotional underdevelopment. However, they often establish significant bonds with horses through equine therapy. Equine therapy involves working with horses to recognise patterns of interaction with others. Although horses do not speak, they are excellent communicators. Understanding the behaviours of horses can help individuals learn about how their actions affect others.

As highly social animals, horses immediately begin to build relationships with people as members of their herd. Participants in equine therapy can choose to hold on to their old ways of interacting with others or use this opportunity to develop new types of relationships. Equine therapy involves simple exercises, such as haltering, leading, and grooming, which teach individuals how to approach others with respect and awareness.

Equine therapy is not just about riding; instead, the most important work is done through interactions between the participant and the horse. During these interactions, individuals may talk about what they see and feel, and the therapist guides them to observe the horse's responses objectively. In this way, they begin to recognise the accuracy or inaccuracy of their perceptions and discover how they may be projecting their issues onto others.

## **Equine Therapy Benefit #3: Setting Boundaries**

Working with horses in equine therapy can help clients recognise their maladaptive thought patterns and behaviours. During a session, clients interact with horses and metaphors are drawn between their behaviour and patterns in their own lives. The therapist can then address issues such as enmeshment and detachment within the client's family. Horses can teach clients simple lessons such as respecting boundaries, as they make it clear when someone has

crossed them. Attempting to control or dominate a horse will not work, and a detached or passive approach can make it difficult to lead them effectively.

## Equine Therapy Benefit #4: Overcoming Fears

Horses are majestic creatures that possess immense strength and size. Being around them can trigger unmet needs, fears, past traumas, feelings of inadequacy, or lack of control in people. It's common for people to worry that the horse may not like them or could cause physical or emotional harm. People learn to tolerate and process these emotions instead of resorting to their usual response of escape or defensiveness. Working with horses is like witnessing grace. Everything feels right and just when in their presence. These incredible animals allow people to bring all kinds of issues into their world and accept them with all their imperfections. In a safe environment, clients learn to face their fears and gain confidence in overcoming challenges. Although many people initially feel intimidated and nervous, they soon realise how quickly they can process these feelings and find comfort in their relationship with the horse. Empowered by this experience, people can develop the confidence to address other fears and transfer these lessons to their day-to-day lives. The AHA Equine Program doesn't require people to have any experience working with animals or even love horses to benefit from equine therapy. All they need is a willingness to give the treatment a chance and move in a different direction than they had in the past.

## Equine Therapy Benefit #5: Trust

Horses are gentle and calming animals. They are honest and straightforward in their interactions, and they do not manipulate or judge. Their presence alone can be therapeutic. For example, a client who had experienced severe abuse in childhood was allowed to sit in a paddock with a horse. After spending some time with the horse, the client was moved to tears and said, "I've never had anyone so big be nice to me before." This experience created a new, positive memory for the client, who had previously believed that anyone bigger or more powerful than her would mistreat her. When people open themselves up to experiences like this, they can grow and develop better relationships and the ability to ask for help. Mel Mardon, also known as "the horse lady" in the media and radio in South Africa and Namibia, has over 27 years of experience working with people of all ages and horses to achieve therapeutic outcomes. She has helped countless children and adults with diverse backgrounds and traumatic experiences through Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. Mel offers her Equine Assisted Psychotherapy from an acreage in Dural, where she also welcomes guests to stay, participate in the program or take time out for a farm stay surrounded by horses and other farm animals.

## Other Benefits of Equine Therapy

These five benefits derived from EAP are key aspects and are just a few examples of the growth that happens through equine-assisted therapy. Other benefits of equine therapy include:

- learning to accept responsibility
- taking care of oneself and others
- patience
- tolerance
- humility
- a sense of pride
- confidence
- an appreciation for the simple joys in life.

## Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy Overview

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is a well-known and effective form of animal-assisted therapy that can help people who suffer from mental illness and addiction. Horses, like humans, are social and curious creatures. They communicate through body language, which makes them ideal therapy partners in mental health and addiction treatment centre programs.

Horses often reflect the emotional state of the person interacting with them. This gives immediate feedback on feelings or thoughts that a person may not recognise in themselves but can identify in the horse. For example, if a person approaches a horse in an agitated state, the horse will likely behave in an agitated way as well. This feedback can be used by the therapist as a foundation to help individuals learn about how their behaviour affects others and how to improve their human relationships. As such, the benefits of equine therapy for behavioural issues and poor mental health are valuable to both clients and therapists alike.

## What Happens During Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy?

Equine-assisted therapy involves participants interacting with horses by grooming, caring for and walking them, which helps establish a trusting relationship between the individual and the horse. While riding may be included, it is not the program's primary focus; instead, it is offered as a reward for achieving certain horsemanship goals and building a strong relationship with the horses. This therapy is particularly beneficial for those with behavioural issues and other mental health disorders, as it can be challenging for them to form connections with others.

During equine therapy sessions, a therapist will use guided imagery and metaphors to help individuals understand the life lessons they can learn from horses and how they can apply them to their lives and relationships. The goals of these sessions typically include improving communication and leadership skills, setting boundaries, developing trust, increasing self-awareness of behaviour and emotions, and improving focus.

## Who Can Benefit from Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy?

Equine-assisted psychotherapy is an incredibly powerful tool that can help individuals suffering from a wide range of conditions such as emotional trauma, PTSD, ASD spectrum, ODD, OCD, depression, anxiety disorders, ADHD, drug or alcohol addiction, and behavioural issues.

The benefits of equine therapy are truly remarkable and can have a profoundly positive impact on an individual's emotional and mental well-being. Horses have a unique ability to calm and soothe individuals, which can be especially helpful for anyone feeling overwhelmed or struggling with life's challenges.

Equine therapy is not just for individuals who have been formally diagnosed with a condition. Anyone can benefit from this approach if they struggle with life's challenges, feel overwhelmed, or have self-concept issues. By working with an equine therapy program therapist, participants can experience the full range of benefits equine therapy offers and make significant progress towards their goals.